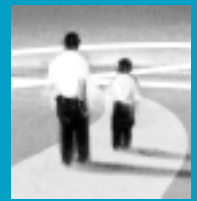


# WHY FOCUS ON FATHERS?

"Being a father, most importantly, is being a role model."



## The Issue

Currently, close to one-third of children live in a single-parent household (see figure 1), and 44 percent of those children live in poverty.<sup>1</sup> In real numbers, this means an adult with two children lives on less than \$13,650 per year. Child poverty has implications for later success in a variety of social measures.<sup>2</sup> Children in low-income families tend to fare poorly in educational achievement and they are at increased risk of juvenile delinquency, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy. All of these risk factors can be softened if children have a strong family bond and a strong family support system that includes positive influence from fathers—even when they do not live in their children's home.

Many of these children are the children of welfare. As such, they are the focus of personal responsibility requirements passed in federal welfare reform designed to enable mothers to leave welfare and support their children without government assistance. However, in attempting to address the needs

of poor children, most state policies invested in only half of the child's available resources. These policies overlook the capacity of fathers to contribute not only to the financial but also to the emotional well-being of children. Clearly, women are capable providers and nurturers, but children can benefit from the support that both their parents can give. This realization is causing low-income fathers to be viewed as a critical element in moving families off welfare and out of poverty.

The stereotype has been that men who father children out of wedlock are absent from their children's lives and do not care about their well-being. Research has shown that this often is not the case. Although many unmarried couples are low-income, they are in committed relationships and consider marriage and dual parenting as ideal for a child's development.<sup>3</sup> Studies also show that, regardless of whether fathers have direct or daily contact with their children, they care very deeply and often suffer emotional stress if they are disconnected.<sup>4</sup> These same fathers experience uncertainty about what is ex-

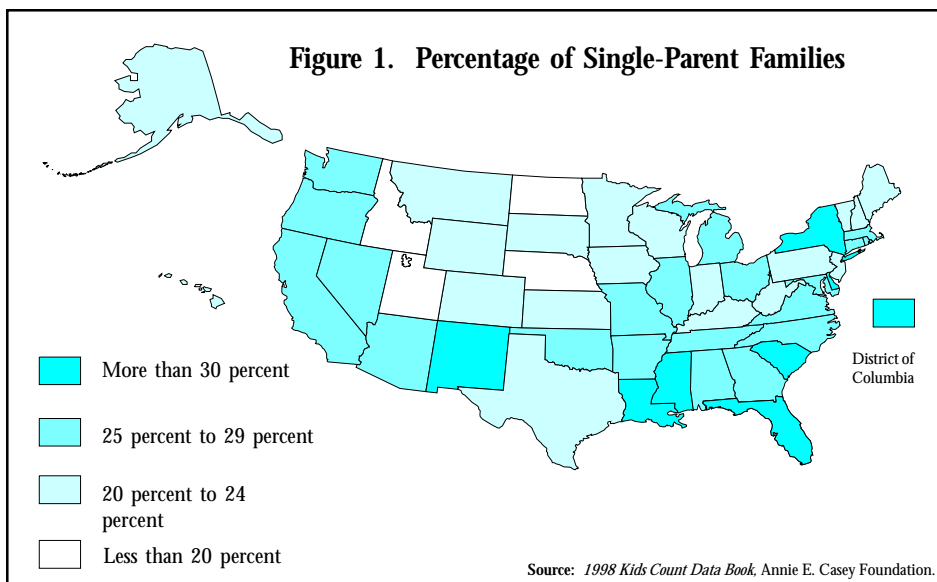
pected of them as fathers, particularly because many have entered manhood without the benefit of an involved father.

Many state human services systems rely on long-standing procedures that do not effectively distinguish between the families that are "playing by the rules" and those that are doing their best to evade the system. As a result families with different needs are routed through the same system of service delivery. State systems have not evolved adequately to keep pace with the changing demographics of the families they serve.

Some fathers enter the system as a result of divorce; others are not married and have different levels of involvement and demonstrate various levels of support for their families. Some relationships between the fathers and mothers are broken beyond repair, while others can be nurtured and salvaged with the help of various services.

No longer can the stereotype of "dead-beat dads" apply to all fathers who may be absent financially or emotionally from their children's lives. Some men are the silent and cohabitating partners of welfare recipients, while others are the unemployed, deadbroke dads who would provide for their families if they had the resources. Some dads may drift in and out of their children's lives, providing what they can when they can, while still others are disenfranchised from their children and the system. Fragile families—low-income, unmarried parents and their children—comprise yet another group. This group may have the best chance of sustaining long-term relationships or even marriage if systems intervene—or do not intervene—appropriately. The chal-

Figure 1. Percentage of Single-Parent Families



### Who Are the Fathers?

- Some are deadbeats—those fathers who can pay to support their children but do not.
- Some are deadbroke—those fathers who would provide for their children but cannot either because they are unemployed or do not make enough to support themselves and their children.
- Some are underground dads—those fathers who provide informal support for their children.
- Some are in a fragile family—low-income, unwed fathers who are in a committed relationship with their child's mother and who usually are providing informal support, even though they may be considered "deadbroke."

challenge for policymakers will be to develop effective mechanisms to sift through the deadbeats, the deadbroke, the undergrounds and the fragile families to ensure that state systems are providing the suitable course of action—child support enforcement, job training, relationship building, mediation or parenting skills education—that helps to guarantee that mothers, children and families benefit accordingly.

The emerging dilemma for policymakers is how to ensure that already fragile families can nurture these foundations in the hopes that their children will not repeat the cycle of poverty. Often, unmarried fathers and mothers function together as a family unit—at least initially—although most public policy does not recognize these formations as families. Part of the answer for policymakers is to ensure that the system does more to encourage family formation and fathers' involvement than to inadvertently erect barriers that push families apart. Public policy need not enter into the realm of supporting or encouraging out-of-wedlock child bearing, although it may have a responsibility to help families move to formalize their relationships or to provide a range of options to both mothers and fathers regarding their role as parents. Investing in these families before they come into contact with social safety nets may help to create better outcomes across a variety of spectrums. These benefits could include reduced welfare spending, lower incarceration rates, fewer teen pregnancies and a more pro-

ductive and taxpaying work force.

Public policy has been slow to recognize the importance of fathers beyond their capacity to provide financial support. Issues facing low-income fathers have never received much attention, aside from strengthening punitive enforcement techniques under child support enforcement policies. Some assert that a father's ability to provide financially is the critical and necessary

"As they see it, the only thing the system knows is collecting money, *right now*. It can't accommodate the irregularity of their income. One group of fathers said to me, 'I don't see my children because I have nothing to offer them. And if I do surface the bounty hunter is after me.'"

—Ron Mincy, Senior Program Officer,  
The Ford Foundation

determinant to becoming and staying involved with his child, while others claim that being involved with his child is the father's motivation to become employed and pay support.<sup>5</sup> There may be disagreement on the process, but all agree that positive outcomes for children and their fathers can result when dads play an active role—both financially and emotionally—in supporting their children.

There is widespread agreement that fathers should be responsible for sup-

porting their children. "Fathers need to understand that even if they do not live with their children, their influence is profound," says Kevin Thurm, deputy secretary for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. No matter the process or model, the critical point is that most fathers want to be connected with their children and to be good parents. Experts agree that most men want to support their children from both a financial and an emotional standpoint. Many fathers provide some type of support, although it may be sporadic and informal.

Based on evidence provided from practitioners that serve low-income fathers, several basic principles emerge as tools to help reshape thinking about a father's involvement and the importance of that involvement.<sup>6</sup> Further examination can assist policymakers to outline more efficient strategies that engage—rather than discourage—poor fathers.

### Terminating Myths

Welfare mothers have been stereotyped as women who know very little about their children's father because the children are the result of casual sexual liaisons. Recent studies of low-income, never-married parents suggest that is not the case.<sup>7</sup> At the birth of their children, 80 percent of parents were romantically involved and more than half were cohabitating. More than 90 percent of new fathers provided financial or in-kind support for the mother during pregnancy. Almost 70 percent of fathers visited their newborn in the hospital after birth. Additionally, more than 80 percent of these fathers ex-

### Profile of Low-Income Fathers

- About one-third of fathers are considered low-income—they earn less than \$8,000 per year.
- Although most work at some point during a year, only 25 percent work full-time during the entire year.
- More than 90 percent have an employment history, but most jobs are seasonal or temporary and tend to be low-wage jobs that do not include benefits.
- Like welfare recipients, these men can find a job, but they have trouble keeping it. The jobs they find seldom pay enough to support a family.

pressed their intent to continue providing support. The fathers' intent seems to demonstrate their commitment to continue involvement, coupled with the fact that mothers want fathers to be involved. Even women who have ended romantic involvement with their child's father reported this desire. Only 10 percent of women did not want the father to be involved. Contrary to public sentiment, women report a father's ability to show love and affection as more important than his ability to provide financial support. The majority of these parents supported the notion that marriage is beneficial to children, and half indicate their interest in getting married.

The preceding information shows that low-income mothers and fathers have high expectations both about their roles as parents and their expectations for relationships. Capitalizing on these expectations is critical to prevent already fragile families from becoming disengaged as pressures of parenting and financial circumstances push families into decisions about continuing their relationship or using public assistance as their safety net.

## The Current Paradigm

Fathers place great importance on being involved with their children, although they may lack the ability to transfer those feelings into practice. Many low-income men who have grown up without their own fathers lack real-life examples of how fathers provide emotional and financial support. For others, feelings of failure and shame because they are not able to provide financially interfere with their involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Most of these fragile families come into contact with state child support enforcement and welfare agencies at some point. Both agencies historically have focused on addressing the needs of mothers to increase their resources as a way to improve the well-being of chil-

dren, while ignoring the needs of fathers. Although less than 20 percent of poor families receive regular child support from fathers, the enforcement system continues to add to its collection arsenal without taking into consideration that some fathers may be willing—but unable—to provide support. Current welfare policy allows for continued eligibility if parents cohabitate, but the distrust of government assistance and misunderstanding of actual rules can keep many fragile families from informing caseworkers about their actual circumstances for fear that they may lose eligibility for assis-

### Core Discoveries About Fathers

- Fathers care
- Father presence matters
- Joblessness affects father involvement
- Systematic barriers affect father involvement
- Low-income fathers and mothers need help developing skills that allow them to work together to raise children
- Many men struggle with the transition from biological father to committed parent
- Family culture can affect a man's beliefs about self and societal expectations

Source: Based on Seven Core Learnings developed by the National Center on Fathers and Families.

tance. This misunderstanding lingers from the time when welfare policy specifically prohibited eligibility if male partners were present in the house. This misperception limits a family's access to services that may help both mothers and fathers to better support their children.

Fathers often judge their worth as parents by the financial contribution they can make; this notion is reinforced by systems that usually recognize fathers only after they fail to meet this expectation. Clearly, state mechanisms should be in place to apply punitive measures that have proven successful in dealing with those fathers who purposely avoid their obligations. However,

using these mechanisms to extend beyond the existing arsenal to embrace new strategies that shift the focus to support families by creating solid foundations for both parents—including father specific services—can reduce the need for punitive mechanisms that try to push parents into accepting a responsibility that they already are attempting, possibly unsuccessfully, to meet.

Recent reforms in welfare and child support enforcement have shifted financial responsibility away from government and back to parents. Time limits and work requirements push welfare recipients into the work force so that earned income now is replacing cash benefits. Although welfare changes have recognized that recipients need help with such things as child care and job training to become responsible financial providers, child support efforts have focused on collecting dad's paycheck without acknowledging that low-income fathers share some of the same barriers to self-sufficiency that mothers on welfare face. These barriers hinder some low-income fathers from providing basic support for their children. Helping to foster a father's emotional connection with his children—as well as to ensure his financial contribution—can help to strengthen the father's ability to be a providing parent.

## Meeting the Challenge—Policy Options for States

Policymakers can help facilitate a new direction for poor families by revitalizing interest in fathers. Three basic steps to guide this transformation are to:

- Develop a statewide strategy;
- Facilitate programmatic support;
- Identify areas for systemic change.

### Develop a Statewide Strategy

#### Making State Systems Father-Friendly

- Transform the appearance of welfare and child support offices to be more “gender neutral.”
- Assess intake policies during welfare application to ensure that applicants understand their male partners can be eligible to receive services.
- Determine whether court procedures have developed options for deadbeat dads aside from jail.
- Identify whether school systems and child care centers are attempting to engage fathers in their child’s development.
- Provide a father liaison to assist fathers to understand their rights and responsibilities under both the welfare and child support systems.
- Ensure that front-line workers effectively communicate policies to both mothers and fathers.

Strategies to help women and children ease the pressures of poverty exist mainly through the welfare, health care and child support systems. These services are available on a statewide basis, with relatively easy access to connection points. These systems are not equipped, however, to engage fathers as service recipients, partly because these systems are not inherently designed to work together to enable clients to maximize their potential. Little has been done to examine how fathers fit within the state’s service delivery systems. Legislators can facilitate collaboration between agencies, in addition to establishing oversight and accountability mechanisms that direct state agencies toward an outcome-based delivery system.

A primary challenge for states will be not only to redefine their child support policies with respect to low-income fathers, but also to assess their treatment of fathers within the various state systems. Taking inventory of the types of practices and policies administered by state entities is crucial to strengthen their abilities to serve and help families. Transforming a service delivery system that has focused almost exclusively on mothers and children is a difficult challenge. Many agencies base their operations on the stereotypes perpetuated about deadbeat dads. Particularly in the current era of welfare reform—where families have a limited time to receive benefits—investing in all potential resources available to both parents in a fragile family can help to ensure that—once they leave welfare—

they have a better chance of never returning.

The **Florida** Commission on Responsible Fatherhood provides the clearest example of a comprehensive statewide strategy to address fatherhood issues. Concerned with the effect of father absence on children, the Legislature established a commission to determine how state laws, regulations and practice interfere with or fail to help fathers become or remain engaged with their children. The commission is directed by statute to make recommendations to the Legislature regarding needed policy changes.

Recommendations also take into consideration the framework and service delivery structure for state institutions such as human services, health care and education. One key goal is to integrate community-level services with state structures. The unique aspect of this approach is that the commission has authority to fund local initiatives based on the statewide strategic plan to serve fathers. The commission receives an annual legislative appropriation to fund programs such as mentoring, job training, parenting life skills and family counseling.

“We believe in the importance of having a father involved in the life of every child. By establishing a commission, we have recognized the need for advocacy on behalf of fathers, research relating to supportive legislation, and outreach programs to increase father participation and involvement,” says

Representative Evelyn Lynn of Florida.

**Connecticut** lawmakers embarked on a similar path in 1999 by passing legislation that requires state agencies to conduct an assessment of how their policies affect low-income fathers and to develop an action plan for service delivery that includes the needs of fathers. The legislation mandated the development of a task force to guide the statewide implementation of a fatherhood strategy across various levels of state government. “For the first time, we have a legislative mandate to examine fathers’ involvement with their children. We can analyze and adjust our public policy, revamp our service delivery systems and educate the public about why fathers must be counted in the family self-sufficiency equation,” says Pat Wilson-Coker, commissioner for the Connecticut Department of Social Services.

#### Facilitate Programmatic Support

Traditional systemic practices have exercised punitive techniques—although these have proven to be largely unsuccessful with low-income fathers—to nudge fathers into being providers. However, new approaches focus on connecting fathers with services that assist them to develop labor market skills and to enhance relationship and parenting skills.

Low-income fathers need the same kinds of employment and family support services that typically are made available to mothers who are trying to move from welfare to employment. Using existing systems as a gateway to connect fathers with services can meet the dual goals of strengthening families and empowering fathers. Many services that fathers need already are well established within communities, but fathers are unaware of how to gain access to these services. Local service providers have little contact with most of the state systems with which fathers

become involved; this limits the ability of service providers to help fathers address some of the legal issues regarding child support and visitation. Programs and agencies have the same goal of providing for children and supporting families, although they may attempt to achieve this goal in different ways. Facilitating the development of wrap-around services using state agencies as a connection point can bring together otherwise reluctant or disengaged fathers with services they need and the community support systems that provide those services.

**Georgia** has developed this model by using the child support enforcement system to bring unemployed fathers who are behind in child support payments into job training programs operated by local community colleges. The goal is to help fathers generate increased financial support for families (by helping them get jobs and advance their skills to get better paying jobs). **Los Angeles County** has championed this process through its Parents' Fair Share model, using the local district attorney's office as the connection point to help fathers get jobs, manage relationships and support their children. The Jobs or Jail Program in **Indianapolis** uses the court system to connect fathers with employment services if they are behind in their child support payments. The Center on Fathers, Families and Workforce Development in **Baltimore, Maryland**, uses pregnant mothers who are participating in

Health Start to reach out to fathers to teach them about parenting.

### Identify Areas for Systemic Change

The child support enforcement system poses one of the most difficult barriers for low-income fathers. Initially designed as a system for working class, divorced parents, procedurally it falls short in performing its basic function to collect support for low-income families. The system's policies do not distinguish between those fathers who evade paying support and those who are unable to pay. Instead, policies are geared toward pursuing a similar course of action for both groups. "Child support enforcement has worked very well for some families, but we are now realizing that poor children have poor fathers who may be unable to support their families without some assistance," says Colorado Director of Child Support Pauline Burton.

Helping child support agencies to balance their traditional mission as a welfare cost-recovery program with an expanded mission to help families become self-supporting can help improve their performance, meet federal performance measures and give low-income fathers an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to provide financial support. States have considerable discretion to establish their own procedures with regard to setting orders and modifications, arrearages and payment plans. If used effectively, these procedures can eliminate current systemic disincentives to low-income fathers; at the same time, they can benefit mothers and children through increased financial and emotional support.

There is no easy solution for the poverty that faces either low-income mothers or fathers, but directing resources and support to fathers and families seems to be a start in the right direction. Generations of poverty and behavior patterns will not be changed with a course on writing resumes and a

few classes on parenting. It takes time and effort to reverse the stranglehold of poverty, unemployment and low wages. The true, lasting effects of these programs are not easy to measure and are difficult to evaluate in the short term. Some results may not materialize for years.

These challenges have left some policymakers skeptical about the real effect programs can have on fathers, particularly because many local and community-run programs have not been subjected to rigorous, formal evaluation. Still, states have nothing to lose and everything to gain by switching gears. Efforts to collect child support from this low-income population have proved inadequate, and even small increases in collections could be beneficial to low-income families. After years of applying a generic welfare and child support policy, the pendulum has started to swing toward looking at the root causes of poverty—low wages, unemployment and a support system that discourages responsible parenting. As in welfare, not all parents will benefit from a new approach. New approaches can help to reach many fathers who currently are outside the system. The lasting benefits for children who can gain from better parenting and additional support provide a strong incentive for change.

—By Dana Reichert, NCSL



Want to know more? Contact  
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(303) 894-3191.

"With all the research telling us how important father involvement is for children, we needed to make sure that our systems were doing all they could to make that a reality. Systemic changes are the only way we can ensure that departments are working together and are headed in the same direction. Many times agencies do their own thing. The reality is that these issues touch a wide variety of state government entities and we need to examine how or if they are responding to fathers,"

—Connecticut Deputy Majority Leader John Martinez

## Notes

1. Megan Gallagher and Sheila Zedlewski, *"Income and Hardship: Poverty Among Children,"* *Snapshots of America's Families* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1999).
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3. Sara MacLanahan, et al., *The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Studies*, (Austin, Texas and Oakland, Calif., Columbia University, June 1999).
4. Levine and Pitt, 118.
5. Ibid, 36-39
6. Based on the seven core principles developed by the National Center on Fathers and Families.
7. Sara MacLanahan, "Dispelling Myths About Unwed Parents," *Mayor's Task Force on Fatherhood Promotion*, Washington, D.C., June 14, 1999.
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